

The iron lady of progressive socialism

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Advocates of gender equality have no reasons to see leader of the Progressive Socialist Party of Ukraine Natalia Vitrenko as their candidate. Although a major share of her voters are middle-aged working women, Mrs. Vitrenko is no more concerned with gender issues than any other Ukrainian politician. Instead, she strives to use her charismatic personality and populist rhetoric to bring this country back to Lenin-style socialism.

While the rapid growth of popularity of Natalia Vitrenko, the leader of a party that barely gathered about 4.04 percent of the vote in the 1998 parliamentary elections, is attributed by some analysts and the media to special support she gets from the Administration as one of the strongest factors that can split up the left-wing electorate, a number of politicians and observers believe that she has the potential of becoming a Ukrainian female version of Belarus's Aleksandr Lukashenka, though others tend to compare her to Vladimir Zhirinovskiy instead.

Born in 1951 in Kyiv to the family of a historian and a journalist, Natalia Vitrenko is an emancipated and self-sufficient personality. Educated at the Kyiv State Institute of National Economy (Department of Statistics), four years after graduation she was awarded a Ph.D. for her thesis on "Statistic Methods of Studying Effectiveness of Public Production". Already involved in "big politics", she received the title of Full Doctor of Economics for her thesis on "Regional Problems of Development of the Social Infrastructure". Her professional career includes senior research fellowship at the Kyiv-based Gosplan research institute and the Council for Study of Productive Forces, and assistant professorship at the Department of Theory of Statistics at the Kyiv Institute of National Economy. Her political career includes active membership of the Communist party of the Soviet Union and the position of a chief ideologist of her institute's Comsomol committee. In 1991, she joined the Socialist party of Ukraine, and shortly became a member of its political executive committee.

She ran for parliament for a Kyiv-based constituency in 1994, lost, and spent half a year working as an adviser on social and economic issues to Speaker of the Ukrainian parliament, the Socialist leader Oleksandr Moroz. In January 1995, she won the by-election in Konotop of the Sumy region, and shortly afterwards chaired the parliamentary subcommittee for pricing and taxation policy. In February 1996, she was expelled from the Socialist party, as she believed, "for criticism of actions of the party chairman Oleksandr Moroz", and formed the party of her own. Since then, Oleksandr Moroz received the most vehement critic of his steps.

Although messianic ideas are common, to a different extent, for all devotees of the left-wing cause, Natalia Vitrenko may rightfully claim a title of the champion in this nomination. Her book, "Saving Ukraine", reflects the PSPU leader's vision of her mission in bringing Ukraine back to what she sees as "the true socialism", and serves as a foundation for her political platform.

On the left end of the Ukrainian political spectrum, Natalia Vitrenko occupies an intense "red" position of radical socialism, based mainly on condemnation of political opponents, resonating rhetoric and strife for power. She builds her political platform, the "progressive socialism", on claims that "the real socialism" was developed in "our country" before 1936, and that the goal of Progressive Socialists is to restore it.

Natalia Vitrenko has been the most vehement critic of her former party colleague Oleksandr Moroz. Their disputes began in 1995, when Mrs. Vitrenko initiated the decision of the Socialist party's political council's resolution urging Moroz to resign from his position of the Speaker as a sign of protest against the policies pursued by President Kuchma and then Prime Minister Yevhen Marchuk. Oleksandr Moroz ignored the resolution, thus, having shown to Mrs. Vitrenko that she was unable to exert pressure on him, limit his power and influence the Socialist party's course from the inside by imposing her own vision, so she opted for breaking up the party. At the foundation conference of the Progressive Socialist party of Ukraine (PSPU) in April 1996, Natalia Vitrenko accused Oleksandr Moroz of bringing the party to "social-liberal positions" and abusing the purity of Lenin's theory of socialism building. By signing the Constitutional agreement with President Kuchma, Moroz finally destroyed the system of Soviet power in the state, she argued. However, in June 1998 the PSPU leaders refused to sign an antigovernment petition while claiming that there was a need to "make a step towards" the Cabinet and "confrontation was not serious". The change in attitude to the government coincided with an idea, voiced by freelance adviser to the President, Director of the Institute of Transformation of the Society Oleg Soskin, "Vitrenko, to a certain extent, is our person. While fighting Communists and Socialists, she helps to ruin the Communist vector in the Ukrainian politics. We must help the left-wingers to ensure that they do not unite." Unification is unlikely at the moment, not only because Mrs.

Vitrenko sees leaders of her potential comrades as rivals: the PSUP is too radical even for confirmed left-wingers like Communist leader Petro Symonenko.

The radical position adopted by the PSPU and rejection of any compromise with opponents suggest that the party targets hard-line left-wingers of the Socialist party and the Communist party and the nostalgic part of the Soviet-minded electorate rather than fighting against Oleksandr Moroz's "collaborationist" position.

The recipe for the salvation of the state, proposed by Mrs. Vitrenko is rather simple: the PSPU agenda includes restoration of the system of councils, priority of the state-owned property as the foundation of the economic system and social guarantees to the people, state ownership of land and natural resources, priority of collective forms of business activity, priority of collective ownership of means of production, distribution, based on the Communist principles. Among the most controversial proposals of the PSPU is the idea to limit citizens' election rights. "In our particular circumstances, when social stratification of the society divided people into masters and serfs, when the power structures are occupied by representatives of criminal capital, we deliberately raise the motto of "full power of the working people" as a guarantee of building a state in the interests of the people involved in socially useful work." In this context she refers to the experience of the Russian Federation of 1918, when the right to vote and run for office was not given to citizens who used hired labor, private traders and commercial middlemen. Then the arrangement proposed by Mrs. Vitrenko was called "the dictatorship of proletariat".

Other key directions of Mrs. Vitrenko's political agenda include a radical constitutional change of the social and economic order in the state, abolish the presidency, restore rights of "working collectives" to manage and control their administrations, nomination of candidates for public offices only by "working collectives" and giving trade unions the right of legislative initiative.

It is unclear, however, how the PSPU leader intends to combine the rigid centralization needed for re-introduction of the planned economic measures with proposed broad powers of "working collectives" in terms of their direct interference with the political process. The only possibility to keep the process under control would be a traditional Soviet combination of formal democracy with de-facto dictatorship of a leading political party and "the most conscious part of the working people".

When discussing her perspectives on ways to reduce the scope of private property in Ukraine, Mrs. Vitrenko proposes the strategy of "peaceful elimination" of the issue by means of gradual restoration of the scope of state-owned property in its full pre-independence size, while stressing that the process should be peaceful and gradual. "Obviously, one may take an orthodox position of immediate liquidation of private property. But then one should realize it would mean bloodshed, a civil war. Because nowadays "new Ukrainians" and bureaucrats have something to protect and means to protect it." Her strategy is more sophisticated: "introduction of progressive taxation based on mandatory declaration of incomes, conscious state policy of supporting public (collective, cooperative, state-owned) property, in our view, will eventually lead to gradual liquidation of non-labor-based nature of private property and then to "lifting" it," she argues.

According to Mrs. Vitrenko, if the PSPU comes to power, the current crisis will be overcome within 2 to 3 months by means of introduction of an emergency status in the economy, total calculation and control. Her other economic proposals are similarly disastrous: stop any cooperation with the IMF and other international financial institutions, abolish commercial confidentiality, start a credit emission, introduce fixed energy and basic consumer goods prices, nationalization of property that provides for national security and enterprises that reduce numbers of jobs and efficiency. Since almost all enterprises have faced reduction in their outputs or lay-offs in the current economic crisis, implementation of the PSPU anti-market logic would lead to their re-nationalization.

The PSPU's weaknesses include the lack of a developed regional network, complete dependence of the entire structure and political decision-making on the leadership, and the lack of an analytical body, currently substituted by Mrs. Vitrenko and her strongest ally Volodymyr Marchenko. For about three years Mrs. Vitrenko has been facing difficulties in organizing her own party, which eventually caused self-liquidation of the Donetsk and Kyiv regional organizations, and sent shivers of instability to the Luhansk, Kharkiv and Zaporizhzhya branches. While Mrs. Vitrenko maintains the party's membership is about seven thousand, accurate numbers are unavailable.

However, in the context of Ukraine's emergent democracy and the lack of traditions of free and fair elections, the weaknesses can, with some effort and investment, be turned into strengths. In Mrs. Vitrenko's views, her strongest arguments that could bring her the election victory include ideas of denouncing the agreement with the IMF, enhancing strategic partnership with Russia and Belarus, creation of a joint CIS collective security system. Mrs. Vitrenko's foreign policy priorities include traditional for left-wingers orientation towards Russia and countries of the East. However, when it comes to returning to the "family of brother peoples of the USSR", she believes that a union with Russia would not be timely, although she would not object to having it in distant future. Instead, she argues that restoration of the USSR would be possible on the basis of a new quality of the union.

Currently Mrs. Vitrenko ranks high in popularity rankings produced by a number of opinion polls, including the generally reliable data of the Socis-Gallup. With her 18 to 21 percent of the unofficial pre-election "votes" she holds the steady second position after the incumbent President Leonid Kuchma in some areas, and reaches the top line in others. Yet, her chances for presidency remain questionable. Rather, if she develops the scenario of gaining substantial vote in the first round and than "dropping" in favor of the likely winner, a compensation for that may be a decision-making position in the new government. If such a position is to involve a possibility to make an impact on Ukraine's economic policy, this country's perspectives for successful pro-market transformation may become far more uncertain than they are now.